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Marketing Youth Library Services: A User Approach

Library services to youth are in crisis. New library school graduates—information managers all—are refusing to enter the field in the numbers they used to and library directors often cannot fill positions they have in youth services. School librarian positions are getting harder to fill as well. Who, after all, wants to have the sole responsibility for three or four libraries when each should be supporting a full-time professional? Young adult librarians are still looked on as optional (The Ohio Library Association just held a program called "Young Adult Service, a Right, Not a Privilege"), and children's librarians are fast becoming an endangered species in some areas of the country. Can anything be done? Does anyone care?

The answer must be a resounding yes. Library services for children are appreciated and demanded by the public. In a 1983 survey of Cuyahoga County, Ohio residents, 93 percent said library programs for children were important services for public libraries to offer second only to libraries' duty to provide information (Decision Research Corporation, 1983, pp. 34, 38). The positive impact of library summer reading programs on the reading skills of children has been demonstrated (Greene & Cummins, 1983, pp. 370-372; Heyns, 1978, p. 177), and many youth librarians experience glowing testimonies about the quality of life improvements that the library has effected in the lives of their children and young adults (Broderick, 1986, p. 118).

In the current climate of scarce tax dollars and career climbing after prestige positions, the forgetful need to be reminded and the ignorant need to be informed of the fact that youth librarians provide extremely valuable services to the community. It is time for marketing—marketing not only youth services but youth librarians themselves.

Definitions

What is marketing? Marketing is the series of decisions that organizations must make to effectively move their products or services to the user. Marketing is public relations with an edge. Public relations tries to influence attitudes, but marketing carefully designs programs that target specific user groups in terms of their needs and desires and programs that will bring about a change in user behavior in order to achieve organizational objectives (Kotler, 1982, p. 6).

According to Philip Kotler (1982), "[m]arketing is the philosophical alternative to force" (p. 7). Organizations try to offer their attractive marketing packages so that their powerful allure of benefits will induce a favorable response. In other words, an exchange of value is sought. The values sought from library users are expressions of tangible and intangible public support, and increased use of the services libraries provide, services that in turn satisfy user needs. It is a voluntary trade.

The User Orientation

An organization that tries to sell a product or service solely on the basis of its own personal tastes will fail. Marketing turns its attention instead on the user. Focusing on the users' needs and desires and finding ways to match them to organizational objectives will increase the use of the products and services offered.

Libraries that try to be all things to all people will end up using public monies inefficiently. If the library manager divides the library's total market into market segments—i.e., subgroups of users with similar characteristics, motivations, and desires—it will be easier to identify users' needs and wants. Then, based on the market segments identified, specific needs and services that are seldom used can be eliminated, and services that are wanted by the user can be expanded.

Most libraries also include another factor in their decision-making—i.e., the library's mission to provide quality services. Adopting a user orientation does not mean that professionals have to give up their professional expertise, but that they must communicate it better since it adds additional opinions into the equation of quality service. It is a matter of balance.

Marketing is, however, a democratic process and is antithetical to elitist approaches. The old "cultural uplift" approach of the nineteenth-century library has largely given way to providing the needs and wants of the public regardless of librarians' opinions of appropriateness (Dragon & Leisner, 1984, p. 34). The "reading ladders" model where librarians offer the next higher level of excellence in literature or the next better step in

edification is not as much used in libraries today but has been replaced with meeting the expressed and perceived needs and desires of the patron. Children's librarians have much more difficulty with this trend than young adult librarians since children are less experienced, less mature, and less able to make wise decisions for themselves. Children need help and adults love to give it. Still, over the last twenty years, library service to children has moved toward giving the wants of young patrons much more attention than it used to and this is reflected in children's library collections today.

Future Trends

The process of planning new services to market in the future should involve a close look at trends in society. Visionaries such as Alvin Toffler (1970; 1980) and John Naisbitt (1982) have published valuable perspectives on current society "megatrends" and their future possibilities. The credibility of these major trends has been established in the business community and in the management literature (Conroy, 1984, p. 9). The implications for library service are strong.

There are three major trends discernible in society today that will have an increasingly strong impact on youth library services in the decades ahead. The first is that society has changed from a society based on industrial production to one based on the creation and distribution of information. New electronic information technologies are being invented so fast that it is impossible for most people to keep up with it all. Computers shrink, but their power grows. Their ability to store retrievable bits of information in ever smaller microscopic storage areas continues to progress. Although the book is not likely to be replaced soon, information is being stored in a variety of technological formats, and youth librarians must continue to be knowledgeable about them and to provide an increasing number of strategically marketed library programs involving the new technologies.

The second important trend states that as new technologies are introduced, there must be a balancing human response to ensure that the technologies are accepted. A "high touch" is needed to offset and ease the way of the "high tech." Some library programs will be aimed at making the new technology "user friendly." Other programs for youth will focus on understanding the complexities of modern life and on bringing meaning to human lives surrounded by nonhuman technologies. Continued emphasis on the youth literatures through book talks, storytelling, and reading programs will bring the greater human interaction and communication needed to cope with hard-edged technologies and an intense world.

The third important trend affecting society-at-large is that hierarchical, centralized, organizational structures are giving way to participatory,

decentralized, informal networks. As individuals become more aware of choices, more willing to work for long-term considerations, and more desirous of seeking greater control over their lives, they want to participate in decisions that affect them. More and more people are preferring to exchange ideas and information as equals and hate it when someone "pulls rank." Networking methods are evolving now that connect people at all levels of organizations. The Type Z organization and the quality circle problem-solving groups are two examples. Directors and managers trained in the hierarchical model will feel increasingly frustrated if they don't change because everyone, it will seem to them, will be wanting to know all the reasons for every decision. Some administrators may feel this way already.

In the library field itself, administrators have been putting increasing importance on marketing the library. The library profession, according to *The ALA Yearbook of Library and Information Services*, "appears to be refining its attitudes away from a previous mode of bubbly, gregarious enthusiasm for PR. In its place, a more subtle, sophisticated approach to promotion has taken root. Public relations also seems to enjoy a previously unknown aura of respectability in the upper echelons of management" (Eldredge, 1986, p. 252).

Nonprofit organizations of all types have recently taken a careful, attentive approach to marketing their services and library directors have also taken to arranging their public relations efforts according to thought out plans. User-oriented marketing is not a temporary fad. In light of society "megatrends" and of trends within librarianship itself, it would seem wise for youth librarians to give the subject considerable thought—and effort as well.

Data Collection

Library services to youth reach a number of markets—e.g., preschoolers, elementary school children, young adults, parents, teachers, other professionals who work with youth, administrators, boards of trustees, community organizations, the disabled, volunteers, etc. Library markets grow and change, so identifying new groups to serve is an ongoing process.

To develop a strategy for marketing a new target group, it is necessary to collect data about them. It is helpful to know the group's needs and wants, their size, age range, location, education, lifestyle, other groups serving them, the group's likelihood of continuing with the library service under consideration, the public relations possibilities, and the cost of reaching the group. Once these factors are considered and weighed against library resources, it is possible to determine whether an effective change or addition to services can be made.

Once the target group is using library services, more information needs to be collected to determine patterns of use. Analyzed data can lead to tailoring the service even closer to the needs of the user. The recent interest in output measures by library administrators underscores their interest in gathering information about users and reinforces the recognition of library directors' increased user orientation. Youth librarians should also use output data as it can provide additional information in designing programs and in managing their collections (Hippenhammer, 1986, pp. 309-13).

The Marketing Mix

Most people think of marketing in terms of selling and advertising. This is not surprising since it is estimated that the average consumer is bombarded with 1600 messages of advertisement throughout the course of one day (Fox, 1984, p. 328). But marketing is much more than selling. It offers several techniques that managers can use to cover the broad spectrum of factors that influence buying (using) behavior. These techniques are called product, price, distribution, and promotion. Blending these tools to produce an effective marketing package is called designing the marketing mix (Kotler, 1982, p. 8).

The first technique involves examining five controllable characteristics of the product: styling, features, quality, packaging, and branding (Kotler, 1982, pp. 292-95). The distinctive look or "feel" of a product is its "styling." A warm, brightly-colored children's room will attract users more than a cold imposing one, for example. Optional product components that can be changed without altering its essence are called "features." Adding a celebrity visit to one's summer reading club may be optional, but it may help in getting free media publicity. The "quality" of a service is its perceived level of performance over time and "packaging" is the larger situation or surroundings that contain the service. Library architecture, children's room arrangement, and shelving design are all examples of packaging. Lastly, giving brand names or logos to products is an attempt to identify and distinguish them as different from the competition's products, usually as more unique or prestigious. Renaming libraries "media centers" is an example of this "branding."

The second technique of marketing is pricing. The problem with encouraging the marketing of libraries is that demands may outstrip resources. In the profit sector, price acts as a control on demand but in nonprofit libraries demand is usually limited through library policies (e.g., restrictions on telephone reference questions and on the number of videotapes circulated) and staff behavior (from shushing to policing youth behavior). Generally, libraries try to provide "free" service to maximize

use, but every service has its costs, whether it is invisible tax support, a trade-off in other services not provided, or inconvenience.

The third marketing technique is distribution. Libraries must make their services available and accessible to their potential users. The design, location, and number of facilities will affect library use. Other common ways to distribute library services have been to use bookmobiles, make classroom visits, or deliver kits of library materials to outreach centers.

The last marketing technique is promotion. Publicity is the most widely used type of promotion in libraries. Publicity is the nonpaid, favorable attention given to a product or service through various media and published as significant news (Kotler, 1982, p. 355). Youth librarians are strong on producing flyers, posters, bulletin boards, press releases, newsletters, and bibliographies, but not so strong on making television and radio appearances, giving speeches, or creating news events. In-person selling (i.e., building goodwill) and paid advertising are other forms of promotion that work and that should also be examined for use in different library settings.

Gaining Credibility

The bulk of public relations is doing the job well and reminding others of that quality. On regularly scheduled occasions, however, librarians should plan and execute the new and or unusual service or marketing project. Perhaps a dusty, old, not-much-used service needs a new polishing or a library image of one kind or another needs updating. For example: Little Miss Muffet / Sat on a tuffet / Eating her curds and whey. / Along came a spider / And sat down beside her / And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Miss Muffet, in this age of feminism, has an image problem. Few self-respecting librarians of either sex today would ever admit publicly to being frightened by something as insignificant as a spider. But one must ask what technological spiders are sitting down beside youth librarians these days and what are their reactions? No doubt, a second verse for poor little Miss Muffet is needed. Big Bad Giant / Sat on his Reliant / Eating his Big Mac with cheese. / He whistled at Ms. Muffett / Who told him to stuff it / And kicked him one right on the knees.

Gaining credibility for youth library services is a difficult business. Libraries in society are generally invisible—e.g., libraries were not even mentioned in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)—and within the library profession, service to children is generally invisible and neglected (White, 1983, pp. 97-99).

Countering the invisibility of youth library services must be approached by confronting several market segments. The first market to

address is the library administrator or principal. Youth librarians need to be seen as managers or as part of the managerial team in order to carry some weight in decision-making. Unfortunately, being creative and offering creative programs is often seen as incompatible with being an effective manager. It is perhaps understandable that administrators feel this way if they regularly see children's librarians in clown suits.

There are, however, several ways to gain credibility with administrators: (1) provide a solid program of substance and save the flash for key public relations moments; (2) regularly communicate that substance to the administrator through monthly and special reports as well as in person; (3) be cooperative in projects the administrator wants tried; and (4) never let the administrator or other professionals get away with accusing a youth librarian of having fun on the job. After all, it is work and hard work at that. If you are having fun, keep it under your hat.

Parents, teachers, and other professionals who serve youth are important additional markets with whom youth librarians should build strong relationships. Do this by communicating—even marketing—one's services to them, by cooperating in projects with them, and by treating their children right. Treating young library patrons with the same courtesy and consideration adults would get will not only impress them but their parents and teachers as well.

The most important markets to confront are the children and young adults themselves. Get to know their wants and needs and then provide library materials and services to meet them. Student advisory councils have worked well, especially with young adults. Ask for their opinions. Spend a small part of the materials budget on their fads and hot topics and enter into and be able to discuss their current interests. Several "with-it" posters in the library can do wonders for public relations and make the library a more comfortable place to visit. Keeping the library alive and sensitive to its many varied markets and meeting patrons well are two precepts that account for 90 percent of effective library service (Hunsicker, 1973, p. 120). Adequately communicating that good performance to the public so it is publicly appreciated is effective public relations. Credibility is based on just such recognized, consistent, competent performance.

Acting Now for the Future

Having looked at some major trends in society and at the need for a marketing user orientation, what specific actions can be taken to improve the public relations of, and the future of, library service to youth? There are three areas where improvements can be made. The first is to identify new market segments (new publics). One such market segment is preschoolers in day-care centers and day-care homes. Preschoolers in day-care homes

and their caregivers are a group virtually untouched by targeted library service and the need is great. During 1985, 39 percent of all three-and-four-year-olds were enrolled in preschool compared to 11 percent twenty years earlier, and between 75 and 90 percent of all family day-care facilities are unlicensed or unregistered (Brophy, 1986, p. 60).

A second market segment is latchkey school-age children. This group is a growing societal phenomenon and cooperative programs with other community agencies are needed.

A third market segment involves youth in crisis. Library information and referral programs for youth with drug problems, suicide intentions, need for abortion alternatives, etc. or cooperation with community programs, hot-lines and other in-place civic organization aids should continue to be established.

The last two potential markets, home schools and the new conservative parochial schools, have grown remarkably in the last decade with the rise of the new conservatism, and both have little or no library service. Careful communication will be the key to serving these two groups successfully.

The second area where improvements should meet the future of library service to youth is in polishing the image of the youth librarian.

1. The concept of generic librarians, known by some as generalists, must be fought. This model of library service has been devastating to the age subject specialties and to service to youth. Children and young adults need librarians deeply knowledgeable in their literatures.
2. Youth librarians must be seen as *public* service professionals. Making a children's librarian catalog juvenile books in a back corner is wasting a public service talent and wasting public relations opportunities. Hiring a young adult librarian who likes to catalog books is like hiring a reference librarian who hates to answer the phone.
3. Publicize awards and recognitions won by youth librarians.
4. Highlight successful youth librarians in both local and national media.
5. Train speakers to promote not only the youth literatures but also the youth library business. All youth librarians should be trained to see themselves as PR ambassadors but a handful of especially fluent and verbal "personalities" should be subsidized to argue and enhance the case at the national level, both within and without the profession. The youth associations within ALA could gather the research studies, anecdotes, and other supportive material in a handy form for background information for persuasive speech making.
6. Youth librarians should mentor and recruit public service talent into their fields.
7. Start establishing a corporate image for "youth library services" by developing the recognizable, visual identity of a logo or symbol. Done

right, branding can be a powerful public relations tool.

The third area where changes should be made is in fine-tuning library services to the trends of the future and to their public relations impact:

1. Include patron use data in managing youth library collections, particularly in additional copy acquisition and weeding decisions.
2. Budget for special public relations programs.
3. Examine opportunities within the community for outreach, particularly within the political arena—e.g., Cuyahoga County Public Library's 1986 Summer Reading Club theme was "Hooray for the U.S.A.!" a theme that tied in nicely with the Statue of Liberty centennial celebrations, and one that gave many local politicians the opportunity to participate in patriotic celebrations at their local library. The governor of Ohio also awarded a citation of merit and letters of congratulations to reading club participants.
4. Delegate preschool story hours to well-trained assistants so the professional can concentrate on the more difficult toddler and school-age story hours.
5. Increase the use of puppets and puppet shows to extend children's literature to wider audiences.
6. Encourage the telling of literary stories in a nonmemorized, storytelling style.
7. Look for ways to mesh new technologies with current library practice—e.g., create a literary pen pal book reviewing club using electronic bulletin boards and modems to encourage young readers to recommend books to their peers.
8. Start a juvenile videotape collection that circulates to children.

Conclusion

As the twenty-first century approaches, it is imperative that youth librarians look to identifying new library user groups and tailoring services to their needs. Areas of service most likely to grow will be: (1) technological forms of information (high tech); (2) human responses through literature and nurturing (high touch); and (3) democratic and egalitarian approaches to supplying user wants and needs (direct touch). The techniques of marketing are ideally suited to addressing these needs of the future.

Needs assessment is an ongoing process that demands constant reevaluation. After data collection from market segment users, it may be found that Miss Muffet's new image as updated earlier is too sharp and a modified image is needed: Little Ms. Muffet / Can rough it and tough it / And face up to problems galore. / Demanding and gaining / Assertiveness training, / She flinches at spiders no more.

The world needs to be told that youth librarians are a new breed. The assertive, knowledgeable, creative talent in the youth library field is impressive. Yes, youth services must be marketed, but the profession needs to market its most valuable resource—its own personnel—the professional youth librarian.

NOTES

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